

Call climate change what it is: violence

Social unrest and famine, superstorms and droughts. Places, species and human beings – none will be spared. Welcome to Occupy Earth

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If you're poor, the only way you're likely to injure someone is the old traditional way: artisanal violence, we could call it – by hands, by knife, by club, or maybe modern hands-on violence, by gun or by car.

But if you're tremendously wealthy, you can practice industrial-scale violence without any manual labor on your own part. You can, say, build a sweatshop factory that will [collapse in Bangladesh](#) and kill more people than any hands-on mass murderer ever did, or you can calculate risk and benefit about putting poisons or unsafe machines into the world, as manufacturers do every day. If you're the leader of a country, you can declare war and kill by the hundreds of thousands or millions. And the nuclear superpowers – the US and Russia – still hold the option of destroying quite a lot of life on Earth.

So do the carbon barons. But when we talk about violence, we almost always talk about violence from below, not above.

Or so I thought when I received a press release last week from a climate group announcing that "[scientists say there is a direct link between changing climate and an increase in violence](#)". What the scientists actually said, in a not-so-newsworthy [article in Nature](#) two and a half years ago, is that there is higher conflict in the tropics in El Nino years, and that perhaps this will scale up to make our age of climate change also an era of civil and international conflict.

The message is that ordinary people will behave badly in an era of intensified climate change.

All this makes sense, unless you go back to the premise and note that climate change is itself violence. Extreme, horrific, longterm, widespread violence.

Climate change is anthropogenic – caused by human beings, some much more than others. We know the consequences of that change: the acidification of oceans and decline of many species in them, the slow [disappearance of island nations such as the Maldives](#), increased flooding, drought, crop failure leading to food-price increases and famine, increasingly turbulent weather. (Think [Hurricane Sandy](#) and the [recent typhoon in the Philippines](#), and [heat waves that kill elderly people](#) by the tens of thousands.)

Climate change is violence.

So if we want to talk about violence and climate change – and we are talking about it, after [last week's horrifying report from the world's top climate scientists](#) – then let's talk about climate change as violence. Rather than worrying about whether ordinary human beings will react turbulently to the destruction of the very means of their survival, let's worry about that destruction – and their survival. Of course water failure, crop failure, flooding and more will lead to mass migration and climate refugees – [they already have](#) – and this will lead to conflict. Those conflicts are being set in motion now.

You can regard the [Arab Spring](#), in part, as a climate conflict: the increase in wheat prices [was one of the triggers](#) for that series of revolts that changed the face of northernmost Africa and the Middle East. On the one hand, you can say, how nice if those people had not been hungry in the first place. On the other, how can you not say, how great is it that those people stood up against being deprived of sustenance and hope? And then you have to look at the systems that created that hunger - the enormous economic inequalities in places such as Egypt and the brutality used to keep down the people at the lower levels of the social system, as well as the weather.

People revolt when their lives are unbearable. Sometimes material reality creates that unbearableness: droughts, plagues, storms, floods. But food and medical care, health and well-being, access to housing and education – these things are also governed by economic means and government policy. That's what the revolt called Occupy Wall Street was against.

Climate change will increase hunger as food prices rise and food production falters, but we already have widespread hunger on Earth, and much of it is due not to the failures of nature and farmers, but to systems of distribution. Almost [16m children](#) in the United States now live with hunger, according to the US Department of Agriculture, and that is not because the vast, agriculturally rich United States cannot produce enough to feed all of us. We are a country whose distribution system is itself a kind of violence.

Climate change is not suddenly bringing about an era of equitable distribution. I suspect people will be revolting in the coming future against what they revolted against in the past: the injustices of the system. They should revolt, and we should be glad they do, if not that they need to (though hope they will recognize that violence is not necessarily where their power lies). One of the events prompting the French Revolution was the [failure of the 1788 wheat crop](#), which made bread prices skyrocket and the poor go hungry. The insurance against such events is often thought to be more authoritarianism and more threats against the poor, but that's only an attempt to keep a lid on what's boiling over; the other way to go is to turn down the heat.

The same week during which I received that ill-thought-out press release about climate and violence, Exxon Mobil Corporation issued a policy report. It makes for boring reading, unless you can make the dry language of business into pictures of the consequences of those acts undertaken for profit. [Exxon says](#):

We are confident that none of our hydrocarbon reserves are now or will become 'stranded'. We believe producing these assets is essential to meeting growing energy demand worldwide.

Stranded assets that mean carbon assets – coal, oil, gas still underground – would become worthless if we decided they could not be extracted and burned in the near future. Because scientists say that we need to leave most of the world's known carbon reserves in the ground if we are to go for the milder rather than the more extreme versions of climate change. Under the milder version, countless more people – species, places – will survive. In the best-case scenario, we

damage the Earth less. We are currently wrangling about how much to devastate the Earth.

In every arena, we need to look at industrial-scale and systemic violence, not just the hands-on violence of the less powerful. When it comes to climate change, this is particularly true. Exxon has decided to bet that we can't make the corporation keep its reserves in the ground, and the company is reassuring its investors that it will continue to profit off the rapid, violent and intentional destruction of the Earth.

That's a tired phrase, the destruction of the Earth, but translate it into the face of a starving child and a barren field – and then multiply that a few million times. Or just picture the tiny bivalves: scallops, oysters, Arctic sea snails that can't form shells in acidifying oceans right now. Or another superstorm tearing apart another city. Climate change is global-scale violence, against places and species as well as against human beings. Once we call it by name, we can start having a real conversation about our priorities and values. Because the revolt against brutality begins with a revolt against the language that hides that brutality.